

Expert Strategies for Working with Anxiety

How to Repair Anxiety Inside Relationships

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How to Repair Anxiety Inside Relationships

Dr. Buczynski: How does a couple react when anxiety tests the dynamic of their relationship?

According to Dr. Ellyn Bader, the pressure of anxiety causes many couples to respond in one of two damaging ways.

Here, Ellyn explains how she uses one specific process to help clients grow from anxiety, instead of crumbling under it.

Dr. Bader: When I start working with a couple, I like to see how they manage anxiety between them. And there's some different ways – some couples are able to tolerate anxiety for growth, which means they can actually live in tension while they're trying to figure out solutions to things that are not easy to figure out. And so, they can keep their relationships alive and growing because they're not afraid of the anxiety and because they're not afraid to tolerate it and live in that kind of complexity.

But most or a lot of the clinical population of couples deal with anxiety one of two ways: one is they recognize they've come to a place where they're not completely in sync and they both tend to feel anxious, but then one person will dominate and will try to control the other person to be just like them. So, what they do with that is they move into a position of dominance and control and the other person usually knuckles under – sometimes they knuckle under for years until they finally get really depressed or they go to a therapist or something like that. But the whole system in those couples gets set up where one person is able to control a lot of what goes on.

The other side of that is that you have what typically in the past a lot of people have called *codependency*. Somebody in a couple is anxious about not being loved or not being accepted or not being enough, and so they give themselves up for the sake of the *we*. And over time, they have less and less of an individual identity because they're afraid of the anxiety, and the anxiety triggers that sense of *I might lose the relationship*.

So, some of my work with couples is actually helping them and teaching them how to not be so afraid of those moments of anxiety between them and being able to live in that and learn how to explore each other's reality, or each other's worlds, in such a way that they can figure it out.

Some issues for a couple can take a long time; I mean, certainly one of the hardest is when one person wants a child and the other one doesn't – but it can be one person wants to move and the other one doesn't.

Dr. Buczynski: So Ellyn has outlined two problematic ways that couples deal with anxiety.

One, one person dominates the relationship, controlling their partner.

or

Two, codependency leads one partner to lose who they are to the relationship.

Now, neither of these dynamics is healthy for a relationship.

So, how do we get clients to stay with their anxieties in a positive, constructive way?

To illustrate, Ellyn has a story of a couple she's working with.

Dr. Bader: So, I have a couple – I'm not quite finished working with them but I've seen them on and off a lot of the last year – and when they came in, the wife in the couple was very, very submissive and very afraid of him.

He is a strong, forceful, Silicon Valley, high-level, very dominant kind of personality and he basically wants things his way. And she had spent a lot of years just going along with that and she was depressed at the time that they came in.

So, when I was working with them initially, one of the things I started with was what made it so difficult for her to express her thoughts, her feelings, her wishes, desires to him?

Of course, initially he *was* very dominating, so I was working with him on creating more space for her to have a voice and for her not to be so afraid of having a voice.

You've heard me talk before about *the initiator/inquirer process* that we use, which is a very powerful process because it defines each person's roles when they're having a difficult discussion.

The roles are defined where there is one person who is an *initiator* and the initiator gets to choose the topic: they bring it up; they bring it up *without blame, without name-calling, without criticism*.

And the other person is asked to listen, to ask questions from a position of genuine curiosity, and then to respond with empathy until they create a soothing moment or moment of connection.

Now, just saying those words to you, those are easy concepts for a therapist to grasp – but they're very difficult for people to do when they're in a marriage or a committed partnership. And in this case, whenever she would bring something up, he always made it about him. So, whatever she would bring up, he would then make it about him.

So, he *couldn't* respond; he was unable to respond to her in any kind of effective way. But I got him to buy into the fact that using those roles could be helpful. And so, over time, she's been able to have much, much more of a voice and hang in there with him, and he's been able to slow down and actually be more responsive to her.

They had a huge issue come up around their son's wedding – it's complicated; we don't need to go into it – but it's an issue where she would have just given up in the past. She would have given up and then resented him for years. So, I wouldn't let her give up.

I kept saying to her, *Hey, you've got to hang in there until you two figure out together how you're going to deal with this because if you end up caving in too quickly on this, you're going to hate him – You're going to be passive-aggressive, withholding, and distant because you gave up.*

And so, it's a lot of work in sessions to help people not cave, not dominate – and that means that the issue doesn't get resolved as quickly, but the outcome is not only a better response to the issue, but the outcome actually creates growth in each person.

Dr. Buczynski: So in this initiator/inquirer process, one partner takes on the initiator role to bring up a topic.

Then, the inquirer asks questions on that topic.

Sounds like a fairly straight forward conversation. But for a couple who is steeped in anxiety even a seemingly basic conversation is an opportunity to develop skills.

The key here is the practitioner's skill in facilitating this process so it stays far away from judgment, blame, and name calling.

Here's another case study where Ellyn explains how to walk clients to a new perspective on anxiety.

Dr. Bader: This was in a couples' workshop where we had taught these roles to the couples, and this was a couple who were a longtime conflict-avoidant, hostile, tension-filled couple because they had 10 years of not dealing with anything and they both pretty much hated each other.

So, we had taught them the roles and they were doing some work in front of the rest of the group. And the wife said to her husband, *Do you really want to know how I feel?*

And he said, *Yes, I do.*

And she said, *I pray for your death.*

And there was this total gasp in the room; total tension in the room. And the husband – you could watch him; it was like his wheels started going and he was thinking, thinking, thinking – and he used what he'd learned and he said to her, *So, just how long have you been praying?*

Which was an *amazing* question to ask. She proceeded to tell him that, because she was Catholic, she didn't believe in divorce; she'd been praying for *years* because she didn't know any other way to get out of this.

And he was able somehow – bless his heart – really help her express this whole thing that she had in her fantasy about how she would get out of the marriage. But the next day they were walking along the road near the workshop and there was a big semi-truck coming down the road, and he said to her, *Now's your chance.*

And they reported it, laughing, and she said, *When he said that to me, it was the first time in years that I felt light, that I knew that I didn't have to hide my authentic self, that I could actually tell him things and he wasn't going to punish me.*

And that was the beginning of them turning things around in a very significant way from a very, very troubled marriage.

But that was 20 or 30 minutes that they were talking about her wishing he was dead. Believe me, there was tension!

Dr. Buczynski: When digging into anxiety in relationships, it often looks like conflict.

So, how do we help couples see where their conflict intersects with some larger worry or fear?

Dr. Bader: I will talk about like, *When you hear your husband or wife or partner say that, what are you feeling?*

Often somebody will say they feel scared or anxious or uncomfortable in some way. And then I'll say, *And what is it that's making you uncomfortable? What are you afraid of right now?*

And they'll say something like, *Well, I'm afraid of being punished if I say any more, or, I'm afraid he'll get mad/she'll get mad, or, I'm afraid of the repercussions.*

And I'll say to them – *This happens a lot in couples, where you have a choice to make about whether you're going to end up in a relationship where you both can be real with each other, and where you both can come forward and learn how to handle things about each other. So that's going to mean living in some tension; it's going to mean being curious instead of furious; it's going to mean really exploring each other's worlds and not using that anxiety that you're feeling as an indicator to shut down.*

I'll talk about how people use the anxiety to either shut down or to dominate – and neither of them are going to get them to the kind of relationship that they really want to have.

Dr. Buczynski: Ellyn uses the phrase “curious instead of furious” to describe to couples how their outlook can shift to keep from shutting down.

How can we teach that concept to our clients?

Dr. Bader: A lot of different ways, depending on the developmental level of the couple.

Some people can respond quickly when you say, *I want you to learn how to ask questions to your partner that don't have to do with yourself but have to do with what they're telling you, and I'll come in and I'll interrupt you anytime that you veer off.*

And they can kind of get that kind of quickly.

Some people can't get it *at all*. And one of the things I do to help – I have a little deck of question cards and I'll give them that deck of cards and I'll say, *Pick one.*

So, some of them are things like, *What does that problem symbolize to you? What does it mean to you? Can you tell me what else you're feeling?*

You can see how the questions are designed to elicit more of their partner's experience. *Tell me another time when you felt that way* is another one.

So, they're all questions – none of them have to do with the listening partner; sometimes listening partners will say things like, *Well, don't you care about how I feel?* – and that's off-limits.

You know, with a person who's very self-absorbed and has a really, really hard time having a sense of the

other, being in that role and having to do it over and over is very growth-promoting from them getting out of that self-absorption.

And, you know, for the therapist working with couples, using this process, they don't realize at first how deep it goes, but it can go really very, very deep with people.

Some partners are going to benefit much more from one role and some are going to benefit much more from the other role – so it's not like every week you switch back and forth or you try to do both roles in one session. It really is taking time in the role that makes the most developmental difference.

For example, a narcissist is going to have a lot of trouble with any kind of empathy, and so the more they have to function in that role, the more they start learning how to attend to their partner.

Dr. Buczynski: As Ellyn shares, the more a couple practices being open about their anxieties, the more resilient they are in their relationship.

For more on how anxiety impacts couples, here's Dr. Joan Borysenko.

Dr. Borysenko: In terms of anxiety in couples, I think what happens when you have one member of a couple who's very, very anxious and the other one is less anxious. I've seen this on a number of different occasions. And what sometimes happens is that the one who is less anxious begins to get impatient (this is just one possibility but I wanted to choose this one) – starts to get impatient with the anxiety of the other.

It's like, for example, the anxious partner says, Oh, my goodness, I emailed so-and-so yesterday and I haven't got a response yet. I'm sure they don't like me, or whatever it is; there are many ways in which anxiety manifests itself. And having heard this over and over and over again, it's possible for the non-anxious partner to say, Don't you get it already? People are busy. You're not always going to get a response right away. And what you begin to get sometimes is impatience with the partner's anxiety.

And then that goes into, Well, can we fix your anxiety? What can we do about your anxiety? And it is, I think, really a very interesting thing to say, Okay, you know your partner. You may know why they're anxious. How can you stay anxious without becoming part of the problem?

Because with an anxious partner, if you start to get, shall we say snippy about that person's behavioral pattern, then what happens is they start to get more anxious that you're withdrawing and might in fact abandon them. So, dealing with mismatches in anxiety is a very interesting thing.

And I have to say, just going back in time, I had a very, very anxious mother who worried all the time and a father who was very generous about that anxiety, who would just look at her and say, Oh, you're such a worrywart. It's okay; everything will be okay.

And, you know, he was also responsible and pointed them to what needed to be done; he was a very good role model about just saying, This is part of her nature. Maybe it's never going to change and I can be good-humored about it.

Dr. Buczynski: There are many ways that anxiety can impact relationships. As Ellyn shared and Joan affirmed, it's not about getting rid of anxiety. Instead, it's about teaching a couple how to work with the tension.

So as we wrap up these bonus sessions, I just want to say...

I hope you found something in each of these discussion that can better help you work with anxious clients.

And thank you for participating in our programs.